

THE DECLINE OF A CLASSIC
THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF WIELAND IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY GERMANY

BY

ALLAN MARTIN CRESS

A.B., University of Illinois, 1942

A.M., University of Illinois, 1948

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN GERMAN
IN THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF THE
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The purpose of this study is to describe and interpret the course of Wieland's fame in nineteenth-century Germany as it is represented in the critical literature of the period. The method pursued entails a chronological examination of Wieland criticism as it evolved during the nineteenth century. The present investigation has restricted itself to the consideration of the expressed critical opinions found in histories of literature and other interpretive works; it has not attempted to deal with the question of Wieland's influence on or survival in the belletristic writings of the period.

The first chapter treats of the relationship between Wieland and the Romanticists and of the Romantic polemics against him. Here it is shown that the critical attacks on Wieland in the *Athenäum*, while not the sole cause of his disrepute in ensuing decades, nevertheless constituted the overt act which set the tone for much subsequent criticism and which resulted in Wieland's eventual literary obscurity. The role of Tieck as the instigator of the polemic campaign against Wieland is found to have been less vital than is usually assumed. The complete abstinence of Novalis from all participation in invective suggests not only his own considerable literary debt to Wieland but also supports the proposition that the real motives behind the polemics were less philosophical and literary than they were personal and vindictive. August Wilhelm Schlegel is seen to have been the actual perpetrator of critical violence against Wieland, and Friedrich Schlegel is shown to have been a willing collaborator.

The polemic campaign of the Romanticists was an essential phase of their effort to establish themselves as an independent literary "school" and to set themselves up as "literary dictators" of Europe. Wieland proved to be the appropriate

target for such an assault: he was accepted as a "classic," and his popularity — though waning — was still considerable. He was an old man, without "school" or followers who would rally to his defense. Moreover, he presented many openings for attack: his many-sidedness as poet, translator, and journalist, his stylistic debt to the French, his modernization of the figures and concepts of classical antiquity, his eudemonism with its emphasis on "Lebensphilosophie" and its accompanying rejection of metaphysical speculation, his utilization of borrowed subject matter for most of his works, and his peculiar admixture of features of "Aufklärung" and of "Schwärmerei" — all provided the Romanticists with ready opportunities for criticism. The polemics of the Schlegels took advantage of these features in order to further the cause of their own new literary tenets at the expense of Wieland's literary reputation.

Chapter Two of the study begins the survey of the actual nineteenth-century Wieland criticism and presents judgments expressed by critics from Jean Paul and Franz Horn to A. F. C. Vilmar. A hypothetical graph of Wieland's fame in the first half of the century would start relatively high above the "base line" of indifference, particularly with the opinions of Goethe and Mme. de Staël, whose views were due in large part to personal acquaintance with Wieland. The line would then show fluctuations — with a generally downward trend — and "valleys" of complete rejection with the criticisms of Hebbel, Eichendorff, and Vilmar. Throughout the period, the impact of Schiller's idealistic, ethical, and esthetic theories and standards noticeably supports the negative attitude fostered by Romantic criticism, and patriotic bias contributes still further to Wieland's disrepute.

The third chapter of the investigation is given over entirely to a discussion of Johann Wilhelm Loebell's book, *Die Entwicklung der deutschen Poesie von Klopstock's erstem Auftreten bis zu Goethe's Tode* (Braunschweig: Schwetschke, 1856-1865), a three-volume work of which the second volume is devoted exclusively to Wieland. This is

significant as the only such extensive treatment of Wieland to appear near the middle of the century and is made even more important by the fact that it is dedicated to a better understanding and fuller appreciation of Wieland. However, it falls far short of its purpose—to restore Wieland to a position of acclaim in the history of German literature. Although it is written with the utmost accuracy and detailed scholarly application, the book suffers from the author's lack of a forceful personality and remains a plodding and pedantic study, regrettably incapable of inspiring renewed interest in Wieland.

Chapter Four examines chronologically the Wieland criticism after Loebell for the remainder of the nineteenth century and into the second decade of the twentieth. While the traditionally negative criticism along ethical, religious, and patriotic lines still persists, criticism in general is found to be in search of a method and to have as its goal the attainment of heightened objectivity. The historical-critical method of literary criticism and the subsequent positivistic method (Scherer), sponsored by current advances in natural-scientific research, markedly increase critical objectivity. Although critical acceptance of Wieland is facilitated greatly by the new objectivity, two factors work for his continued obscurity: the very objectivity which fosters tolerance also breeds indifference; and, secondly, increased distance in time from Wieland encourages both detachment and apathy. Thus, while Wieland is better understood by those who concern themselves with him at all, and while his historical significance is freely granted, the second half of the century finds no room for him as a poet to be read and actively accepted.

An appendix to the fourth chapter presents a sampling of the contents of "Lesebücher," theoretical and pedagogical works, and books of themes for the German essay in the secondary schools of the nineteenth century. The nature of the works investigated intimates clearly that the traditional grounds for the rejection of Wieland were carried over from the first half of the century and rigidly maintained in the

schools throughout the period.

The fifth and final chapter presents a brief survey of the publications of Wieland's works and of works concerning Wieland during the nineteenth century. Although no attempt is made at bibliographical completeness, sufficient evidence is offered to indicate that only *Oberon* and possibly *Die Abderiten* retained their popularity throughout the century, that the publication of "complete works" gave way early in the period to the preparation of "selected" editions, and that publishers often restricted their activities to the printing of such works as had been declared innocuous by the critics.

Also to be found in the fifth chapter is a concise summary of the criticism examined throughout the study. In this recapitulation, the continual downward trend of Wieland's literary reputation among the critics comes clearly into view. In the history of changing literary tastes, even cool and detached recognition of a writer's historical significance will not prevent his gradual lapse into obscurity.

The investigation closes with the suggestion that an increasingly active interest in and sympathy for Wieland in the present day may be symptomatic of a renewed appreciation for that which is common to western culture in German literature at a time when traditional considerations have become untenable.

VITA

Allan Martin Cress was born in Hillsboro, Illinois, on May 1, 1921. After completing his elementary and high school years in Hillsboro, he entered the University of Illinois in 1938. He received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1942. The years from 1942 to 1946 were spent with the Army of the United States. He returned to the University of Illinois in 1946 as a graduate student and was awarded the degree of Master of Arts in 1948. He has been a part-time assistant in German with the exception of the academic year 1949-1950, when he held a University Fellowship.

